

sources of income, such as cool boxes in which they can take fish to sell at markets, in return for a halt to the bird-netting.

- E Once the expedition team had reached its destination, it was seven days before we spotted the first sandpiper. In the following days, more began to arrive and the males' song was heard, advertising their patches of territory to potential mates. As the sandpipers paired up, the song gave way to the quiet of egg-laying and incubation. In total nine nests were found. The first one was lost to a predator, along with the female attending it. This was a stark reminder of the vulnerability of a tiny population to natural events, such as storms or predation.

The team then selected donor nests and transferred the eggs to specially prepared incubators. They collected 20 eggs in all, taking entire clutches each time – it was early in the breeding season, so the females were likely to lay replacements. Then 50 days after our arrival, the moment arrived: I witnessed my first wild spoon-billed sandpipers hatch. I had been lying inside a wind-battered hide for 36 hours when I saw the first tiny chicks emerge from the eggs. Having hidden a microphone near the nest, I could also just hear their first calls. Later, I watched them stumbling through the 15 cm-high jungle of grasses on comically oversized legs and feet. But my joy was tempered by concern. Difficulties on their migration route and in their wintering areas meant that other tiny creatures like these faced immense dangers.

- F The complex rescue plan does give some grounds for hope. Young chicks were flown to WWT Slimbridge last year and again this summer. A high-tech biosecure unit has been built for them there. It is divided in two, with the older birds in one section and this year's chicks in the other. To minimise the risk of infections, staff change into full-body overalls and rubber shoes and wash their hands before entering. Hygiene is crucial: even a single strand of human hair could harm the chicks by becoming twisted round their legs or bills. The rescue plan's final stage, once the captive flock has built up sufficiently, will be to fly eggs back to Russia, to release the chicks there. It's a gamble, but when the survival of a species this special is at stake, you have to try.